



Q&A: When the Boss Doesn't Want You On an Outside Board (5/17)

Q: This is my second year as a senior vice president at the U.S. subsidiary of a large European firm. I've been with the company for 8 years, and have a good relationship with my boss, the U.S. chief executive. I've had some interest in pursuing my first outside board of directors role, and mentioned the possibility to the CEO. However, he gently pushes the idea off into the future until "we get this project out of the way"-- and it always seems that there's a next project to take its place. He seems negative overall on the idea of my taking on an outside board commitment. Any tips for persuading the boss on this, within my current career realities?

A: Start by drawing the chief out a bit on your time usage and commitments (evaluation talks are a good time for this). How does he view your current productivity and effectiveness? Just how well does he view your performance on those "projects?" If these grades are lower than you'd like, yes, you'll need to work on your day job first. If you're pulling all A's though, and are a real asset to the company (and to the CEO), you have both a better case and leverage to pursue it. "If you're of value, the company has an interest in retaining you and in seeing you develop as a professional," notes Dave Opton, founder of the Execunet business and career networking firm. If you're proving yourself as a real hi-pot, your boss has a vested interest in keeping you happy. The CEO should be thinking "if I get in this guy's way, he'll probably develop his potential as a senior leader elsewhere," Opton observes.

Drawing the CEO out on specific issues with your board wannabe plans also allows you to address and counter them. Time commitments? Explore some board possibilities on your own, and develop good estimates on the time really required. Show how this can fit with your current demands (and if it *would* prove a problem, rethink). Conflicts? Any corporation such as your should have legal and compliance staff able to give a quick vetting to any board opportunity for potential conflicts of interest. "Often, there are fewer conflicts at your level than for a CEO" observes Kathy Simmons, executive director at BlueSteps, the career services division of the American Society of Association Executives. More to the point, shouldn't your boss assume someone who's a senior VP can make such a judgment call?

Marshal your facts in advance, pin down your CEO's concerns, and realize that you're a valuable commodity going into the board discussion. You should be able to change some minds.

RALPH WARD'S BOARDROOM INSIDER is published monthly for directors, CEOs, those who work with corporate and nonprofit boards (corporate secretaries, corporate counsel, support staff, and consultants), and those who are board prospects.

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